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**Green
Issue**



Activism

From Brownie Scout to Assemblywoman: Fiona Ma takes on playgrounds, food banks, hepatitis B, diabetes ... and the next generation.

By Bill Picture
Photographs by Pete Thompson

Scout's Honor



FIONA MA'S NEW BUSINESS CARD may read "Assemblywoman," but inside the feisty former San Francisco Supervisor beats the heart of a seasoned community activist. And, although her latest gig demands a certain level of diplomacy, Ma, who was chosen to represent California's 12th Assembly District by 70 percent of the voters in last November's general election, doesn't pull any punches when it comes to fighting for the worthy causes on her activist radar.

"Yeah, when I make a decision about something, I tend to go full-steam ahead," she says. "That's a tough thing to do,

because you know that not everyone out there is going to agree with you. But even if they don't agree with me, I think they at least respect me and respect my passion."

Ma's passion, as she puts it, is "helping people." And she first got the opportunity to put that passion to work when she was appointed to serve on a commission formed by then-San Francisco Mayor Frank Jordan.

"I learned so much from that experience," she recalls. "I knew way before then that I wanted to help people, but I had never really considered politics. I didn't have any family members in politics, or know anyone in politics. So it just never occurred to me to go that route."

The only route that had occurred to Ma up until that point was the one that her immigrant parents had put her on. "Their whole emphasis was on education," Ma explains. "They came here from China with a couple thousand dollars in their pockets, and they had to work so hard. Naturally, they wanted better for their kids. And they knew that a good education would help level the playing field for us. So they told us, 'Get as many degrees as you can.' And that's exactly what I did."

After graduating from Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, Ma went on to earn a master's degree in taxation from Golden Gate University in San Francisco and an MBA from Pepperdine University in Southern California. That, in turn, led to a job at Big Four auditing firm Ernst & Young. But big-league accounting, while profitable, failed to satisfy Ma's urge to make a difference, an urge she says she developed as a child.

"The idea of participating in the community: I got that from Brownies and Girl Scouts," she says. "You know, whenever I meet someone in public service, I usually ask, 'Were you ever a Boy Scout or a Girl Scout?' And probably 95 percent of the time, they say 'yes.'"

It was while working with Mayor Jordan and, later, then-State Senate President John Burton, that Ma's future was eventually revealed to her. Suddenly, a thick black line appeared connecting the dots between her community involvement as a Brownie and a career in public service.

"When I was working with Mayor Jordan, I learned how important it is to be at the table to help shape the policies being made that affect our daily lives. From Senator Burton, I learned to stand up for what you believe in, whether it's popular or not. And I learned that your job as an elected official is to serve every person who walks into your office." Ma established the same open-door policy

while serving on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and brought it with her when she moved into her office at the State Building on Golden Gate Avenue earlier this year.

Though watching out for the best interests of the voters in her district is a full-time job—and then some—Ma still makes time for community-level activism. In addition to serving on five Assembly committees, Ma also sits on the board of Community Renaissance (formerly the National Housing Development Council), which fights to preserve affordable housing. The nonprofit identifies at-risk rental properties na-

tionwide, and helps secure federal funds to purchase and revitalize the often-neglected properties for lease to low- and middle-income renters.

Ma also helps coordinate the food bank at St. John's Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Volunteers from St. John's make weekly trips to the San Francisco

Food Bank in the Potrero Hill neighborhood to select groceries and produce, which are then distributed to low-income households in the City's Richmond District. Five years ago, when the program started, St. John's food bank was helping feed 80 households. With Ma's help, that number is now closer to 180.

Indeed, Ma's activism has touched San Franciscans in neighborhoods across the board. For example, while a supervisor, she began raising money to build and refurbish playgrounds in the Sunset District. To this day, the issue is one that remains close to Ma's heart.

Health issues, particularly those affecting Asian Americans, are Ma's latest crusade. She currently serves as president of the Asian American Donor Program (which boasts more than 412,000 registrants and has saved 121 lives since its founding in 1989), and serves on the board of the Asian Diabetes Council of the American Diabetes Association.

Most recently, Ma has been working to increase awareness of hepatitis B within the Asian American community. The silent epidemic affects one in ten Asians. One quarter of those who contract hepatitis B will ultimately die of liver cancer or liver failure.

Just prior to vacating her seat on the Board of Supervisors, Ma introduced a resolution calling for the San Francisco Department of Public Health to partner with the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University and the AsianWeek Foundation in the creation of the recently-launched "San Francisco Hep B Free" campaign, which aims to screen and vaccinate the city's entire Asian American population for the disease. If the campaign is successful, it could serve as a model for a statewide program.

In January, Ma began laying the groundwork to take San Francisco Hep B Free statewide. Just weeks after assuming her duties as Assemblywoman, Ma introduced a bill that, if it passes, will step up the state's existing efforts to provide education, outreach, and other much-needed social services to ethnic groups considered to be at highest risk for hepatitis and diabetes.

**Do you think things need
changing around here? You
have the power to change them.
But you have to change them.**

—FIONA MA



Target: Hep B

Next on Assemblywoman Fiona Ma's "to do" list is providing hepatitis B screenings and vaccinations for San Francisco's at-risk Asian American population. A resolution introduced last November by the then-Supervisor partnered the City's Department of Public Health with Stanford University's Asian Liver Center and the AsianWeek Foundation to launch the San Francisco Hep B Free campaign. Ma has since introduced a bill in the Assembly that will step up the state's efforts to battle hepatitis B, laying the groundwork to eventually take San Francisco Hep B Free statewide.

A few facts about hepatitis B, the Bay Area, and the Asian American community:

- The Bay Area is home to 1.3 million persons of Asian descent
- 10 percent of Asians are living with chronic hepatitis B
- 10 percent of Asians with hepatitis B are unaware they have the disease
- Many people who contract hepatitis B will never develop symptoms, but can still transmit the disease to others
- 25 percent of Asians who contract hepatitis B will die of liver cancer or liver failure
- More people die of liver cancer in the Bay Area than anywhere else in the country

"Hepatitis B and diabetes—these issues aren't particularly sexy," Ma explains. "But they're becoming more and more of a problem in the Asian American community. And when I feel that an important issue isn't being addressed, I feel like it's my responsibility to bring it to the forefront."

Ma's involvement in the big push for hepatitis B screenings is personal more than political. Ma herself lives with the disease, having contracted it from her mother via perinatal exposure, a common means of transmission.

"I'm perfectly fine today," she says. "But it's one of those things that you and your doctor have to monitor very closely, because this disease rarely shows symptoms until it's too late for treatment. That's why we're urging people to get screened right away and get vaccinated."

But all parties involved say that the task is a difficult one, as lack of awareness, coupled with cultural differences and language barriers, prevent many Asian Americans from seeking medical attention. The same obstacles also prevent many from seeking treatment for mental disorders. So Ma has taken on that challenge as well.

"I always seem to choose these underdog causes," Ma jokes. "But the uphill battles are my favorites. In the case of mental

illness, someone very close to me has battled chronic depression for most of her life. And I know how difficult it was for that individual and the family to deal with the disorder."

The future of philanthropy rests with the next generation, according to Ma. She recognizes, however, that putting generally apathetic youth on the road to community involvement is going to require that current leaders play to more than their potential successors' still-forming sense of moral and civic responsibility.

"You have to speak to them in a language they can understand," she says. "I spend a lot of time speaking at schools, and I tell the kids: Do you want to make sure there's money for you to go to college? Do you want to own your own home some day? Then you better start getting involved. Do you think things need changing around here? You have the power to change them. But you have to change them." **B**

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—FIONA MA